

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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A friend was determined to watch the London Olympics. He saved for a year to be there and savour the mother of all sporting actions, the Olympics. We all know the action and the layered drama that sports produce but he speaks about a completely different aspect about those Olympics. After having spent more than 20 years of his life watching cricket in India, he swears by the organisational ability of England to host an event of that magnitude. He claims that even in these times of terror attacks and hyper-security measures, London never seemed ruffled. It was always polite and seemingly laidback.

My buddy is now off to the UK again to watch the Cricket World Cup. Since the Summer Olympics of 2012, a school in Peshawar has been attacked, so has the Manchester Arena and lately even a mosque in New Zealand. It is clear. The perpetrators want to widen their strike zones to increase the fear. Hence as I write this preview to this mega cricketing event, I want to share that safety of all concerned is paramount for me.

Afghanistan, the babies of the cricketing world, would know what I mean. For them, cricket provides identity, it gives them a purpose and above all it gives them pride. They will certainly not win this one but their mere presence gives hope to our region. I will be checking their progress very closely.

I am not sure if Madame Tussauds, London has a statue of Virat Kohli. The one in New Delhi has him. Whoever did the statue has done a brilliant job but it missed Virat's intensity; the energy in his pose is not there. India is one of my four semi-finalists. But for that to see the light of the day, Virat's intensity will be the key.

My other three semi-finalists are Australia, England and New Zealand. In Australia's case, I am bullish more because of their big daddy Justin Langer and then of course the team. Having known Langer the coach, I feel his man-management skills are one of Australia's biggest strengths. The fact that he was not the most talented of batsmen makes him understand his role so well.

England and New Zealand play a brand of cricket which is suited to the conditions in the UK. If it is hot, then they have the batsmen to decimate attacks. If it is moving around, then they have the bowlers to take advantage. England have raised the bar for themselves. It is for them to match it up now. Eoin Morgan is a fine man. I have worked with him while with the Kolkata Knight Riders. His good luck and charm can get the work done, trust me. England's beautiful new jersey will only enhance the Morgan Magic!

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India's venue for the first game of this World Cup is an interesting one. It is called Ageas Bowl or Rose Bowl. My sister who now lives in the US is convinced that "bowl" has some connection with America's annual football championship, Super Bowl. I tried to convince her against it but then my record in influencing women is quite appalling. For instance, I am still trying to convince my wife that Faf Du Plessis is more good looking than Quinton De Kock. So far, I am struggling.

The bowl shape of this venue is only aesthetics. It welcomes runs from the batsmen as it did three weeks back when England and Pakistan played here. Collectively more than 700 runs were scored in that game as bowlers were being served as a cheap buffet. Maybe this will be the case for the India-South Africa game too.

India played their practice game on May 28th which is a week ago. You may say that it augurs well for India as it would have rested them but I personally feel that it is about being in the thick of the action. In a big tournament there is so much nervous energy and you want it to be released sooner than later.

I have a feeling that India will play KL Rahul at number four. He has the correctness in his technique to counter a good bowling day of the opposition. It will be interesting to see how Virat and the coaching staff decide on all-rounders - whether they go with Hardik Pandya or Vijay Shankar or they opt for Ravinder Jadeja. Personally, I'd want to play Jadeja and Pandya both with three fast bowlers in Mohammed Shami, Jaspreet Bumrah and Bhuvneshwar Kumar.

Yes, South Africa have had two ordinary results. I thought they should have made a better effort against Bangladesh. I thought the South Africans bowled poorly in the death overs. Despite these two reversals, South Africa are a tough side. They bat deep, have the fast bowlers and a quality spinner in Imran Tahir.

Our opening batsmen Shikhar Dhawan and Rohit Sharma will need to go hard at South Africa. There is no point being circumspect. Positive foot movement, seeing the ball early and playing it late will be the key. Not many balls will be pitched up as natural lengths of Kagiso Rabada and Chris Morris are on good length and aimed at batsman's ribcage. Rabada is an absolute quality and we need to respect that. I have seen him a few times in a tuxedo and he looks quite sharp especially with his pointed shoes. But I am convinced that Du Plessis is the most handsome of all. Will keep you posted if wife's point of view changes.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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We will get to cricket in a while as I first want to talk about the French Open semi-final that was played on Friday. I have always been a Roger Federer fan. The ease and finesse of Federer's game has always reminded me of Mark Waugh. You may argue Junior Waugh's greatness quotient and my comparison to Federer. But for a change this is not about records or statistics, numbers or titles, it is about pure aesthetics, the ease on the eye and also that extra split second that these champions have to execute their craft.

A lot of time the likes of Federers' or Mark Waughs' are not given enough credit because they make the job look so damn easy. To be in a position to hit that perfect 26th-down-the-line-shot in the fifth set of an Australian Open final in 2017 requires Federer to work very hard. For Mark to pluck a catch in the first slip off Shane Warne, despite being blinded by an enthusiastic Ian Healy, requires consistent practice.

Closer home a lot of people feel that Rohit Sharma is all talent. The general belief is that he doesn't need to work hard as stroke play comes naturally to him. I was never convinced by this observation. Perhaps Rohit smiles a lot more on the field, walks with a right shoulder-slouch of a Mohammed Azharuddin and was given a nickname "Yedaa" (meaning Crazy in Marathi) by Yuvraj Singh makes people feel that maybe he is not that serious. Add to fact that he is still trying to settle in Test cricket and doesn't have that chiseled body doesn't help Rohit's case. I hope some of this changes after his hundred in the game against South Africa.

This was not a typical Rohit Sharma flowing innings. It was more of an old-fashioned, pre-IPL era, an out of character stay at the wicket. He will need more of this in the game against Australia on Sunday where he plays for the bottom line and not for aesthetics. The current world champions will never give easy stuff to Rohit. He will have to fight it out. The wicket at the Oval has more bounce and Indian batsmen need to be mindful of that.

There is a lot said about MS Dhoni and his gloves. I am not sure if the issue deserved that much attention. I hope we have heard the last of this and focus will now be on the gloveman and not his gloves. I feel that the ICC has more stuff to handle rather than these things. I am not saying that ICC should not put their foot down on these matters but I am clearly debating if the issue needed to be dealt the way it has been. Gameplan/Dinesh Chopra Media.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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There is a strange phenomenon which diligently encroaches upon us each time when India plays Pakistan on a cricket field. Earlier it used to blast out from news channels but now thanks to cheaper data from telecom companies it sneaks into our lives through our smart phones. I call this intellectually paralytic content from both sides of the border as “Venomous Videos”. These days it is almost “cool” to lose perspective and create Pakistan or India bashing videos to promote what is essentially a cricket match.

If my memory serves me right, we started this trend of below-the-belt marketing campaigns. We began by reminding Pakistan that we have a better record against them in ICC tournaments. Then, we did a disgraceful transition into a more delicate space and started reminding Pakistan of their lineage. Some of my fellow cricketers also got sucked into it and started bashing Pakistan. My guess is that it was all being done to gain a few thousand followers on Twitter. Is it a mere coincidence that this game overlaps Father’s Day?

Then, it was Pakistan’s turn to react. Not surprisingly they were equally toxic. None of us liked when they made a video with reference to Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. At the time of writing this we have duly returned the compliment of that video, including one Ms Poonam Pandey jumping in to save the honour of our country.

I also wonder what the marketing whiz kids or the ad agencies who make this content are thinking. Is this content humorous? No sir, it is vengeful. Is it promoting the game? I doubt if an India-Pak cricket match needs over-the-top marketing. Will this content show Pakistan in poor light and force them to stop cross-border terrorism? You must be kidding. Is it patriotism or even creative? Well, if the creators of these videos call them patriots or creative then they are surely challenging the peace of the souls of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and UstadNusratFateh Ali Khan Sahab.

I am not an artist but I am convinced that no art form thrives on animosity. I can tell you from my experience of visiting Pakistan that the man on the street there doesn’t want war against India. He is so busy in organising his survival that he doesn’t have the bandwidth to contemplate all this. Things are better on our side. But even then to suggest that whole of India resonates the sentiments expressed in these videos is to put a big question mark on our discerning ability.

Both India and Pakistan are young sides with some special talent. Bumrah, Hardik, Babar Azam et al are the ones who will take world cricket forward. Then there are likes of ViratKohli, Rohit Sharma and MohammadAamir who remind us why this is such a beautiful game. The skills on show on Sunday will be exemplary. I just hope that Old Trafford has enough covers to ensure that the game is not impacted by rains. If not, then someone please inform the ICC that another set of videos could be on the way: and this time both sides of the border will have a common target.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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Even when I was on the pleasant side of 20s and 30s, my music interests were always on the calmer side. Back in 2003, I had no clue who was MC Hammer. Or what was his song “You Can’t Touch This” all about. But West Indian bowler Tino Best made sure I would never forget either. At the time, he was opening the bowling for Barbados and I was in the West Indies playing for India A. Trust me he was quick...very quick. On a few occasions, I could not even spot the ball. Each time I would play and miss, Tino would say, “You Can’t Touch This”. It must have happened at least 6 to 7 times. At one point, I wanted to tell him, “yes buddy, I know but I am trying to”. Whatever little I could touch, helped me score 65 in that innings.

Later on, in that tour, I got to know about “You Can’t Touch This”, MC Hammer and his another chart-buster “Too Legit To Quit”. I wondered if Tino was sledging or just humming the song. That tour and my subsequent brushes with the Caribbean players convinced me that they all move around with a pair of invisible headphones. Their walk, their talk, their celebrations everything has a music bed to it. I just love their company.

These days some West Indian boys sync their moves to “Bruk Off Yuh Back” by Konshens X Chris Brown. Don’t look at me. I have no idea what the song stands for. They just like it and I like to see them like it. I am not even sure if one of them would like to bring the lyrics in when they play India on Wednesday at Manchester. If rain allows this contest then we can be in for some fun.

Personally, I think West Indies doing well in Test matches augurs well for world cricket. If they do well in limited-over cricket just treat it as a bonus. I was thrilled when they beat England 2-1 in the recent Test series. In ODIs, with two new balls, the fielding restrictions, bouncer restrictions and placid pitches we have already presented enough challenges for fast bowlers. But only the West Indian race can do it with their raw talent.

And believe me it will help Indian cricket too as we have played far too many lop-sided contests against them in the recent past. Besides they have fair interest in IPL too. Like Hammer says, “Stop, Hammer Time” in his song “You Can’t Touch This”, the world would like to see “West Indies Time” once again. But only after India beats them at Manchester!!!

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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I am in love with England's World Cup jersey. I think after India's 1992 World Cup navy blue outfit, England's match shirt has stolen the thunder for me. The sky blue colour is delicious. I can easily have one of those teamed with dark blue denims and a pair of white sneakers.

The way England started the tournament they were justifying their handsome outfits. They came out with sparkling clean outfits from a one-sided game against South Africa. There were creases on their shirts after loss to Pakistan but both the outfits and egos were crumpled when Sri Lanka beat them at Leeds. They are currently at 4 wins from seven games. With those 8 precious points they take on India on Sunday.

Both teams play similar brand of cricket – aggressive, refreshing and creative. Both are like boxers who don't believe in blocking. It is a reflection of their leadership. I have shared the dressing-room with England captain Eoin Morgan at KKR. His pleasing smile and communication skills always made him my favourite to handle press when KKR had a bad loss. His luggage carried all the proper English etiquettes. I have observed him having tandoori chicken with a fork and a knife, something I am still struggling to master. He is equally deft with the bat too searching for angles to create spaces.

Virat Kohli and Morgan are a fire and ice combination. Kohli is relentless too when it comes to putting pressure. I like his demanding nature from his bowlers and they have responded well so far. The best part is the variety in our bowling attack. Personally, I would want to give another opportunity to Vijay Shankar, I think critics have been too harsh on the young man.

I would give a lot of credit to the Indian support staff for the performance of the team. I came across a set of statistics which notes that in ODIs since Champions Trophy 2017, there have been negligible no-balls bowled by Indian fast bowlers. Bhuvneshwar has bowled none in 2315 balls, Pandya has just one in 1728 deliveries and Jasprit Bumrah four in 2,052. Isn't it remarkable? I think bowling coach Bharat Arun deserves praise for that. Even in fielding, India have been top class.

I was extremely disappointed the way West Indies collapsed on Thursday. A lot of the cricketing world feels they don't believe in currency beyond the T20s. Post their game against India, the critics have been even more scathing. I still have time for the West Indies. Their good show is critical for the fabric of overall health of world cricket. A friend who is into Tarot card reading feels West Indies should change the colour of their outfits. So far, I have dismissed that suggestion, as I continue to admire English uniform.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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Now that I have retired from the game, I can afford an odd, silly luxury. One of them being living in the future. Without sounding arrogant or careless, I feel the game against Sri Lanka can be a good practice opportunity for the Indian team. But at the same time, they must win the contest to give them any chance to finish tops on the points table. That is possible only if India beat Sri Lanka and later South Africa beat Australia in the second game today. I just feel India will not be too keen to play the current third placed team England in the semi-finals. It is a bit uncontrollable but if the script was to be perfect then India should finish number one and play fourth ranked team which in all likelihood is going to be New Zealand.

This game gives India one more opportunity which is to settle their middle order. Currently they are playing Rishabh Pant at number 4. My thoughts are if Hardik is hitting them the way he is hitting them, then he deserves more air time in the middle. I love his plans. He goes deep in the crease, waits with a strong base, still head and then whacks it from any length that is presented. Not in terms of volume of runs but in sheer approach and methodology he reminds me of South Africa's Lance Klusener during the 1999 World Cup.

There is a lot being said about MS Dhoni and his approach in last year or so. His blatant turn down for singles, inability to find fence during key moments has left a lot of observers frustrated. The fans are confused whether to decry or support Dhoni at this juncture of his career. From where I am looking at it, it is pretty obvious that he wants to leave the scene with a bang but is not able to convert his intent into actions. It is a classic case of one time CEO trying to crack a deal but his faculties are not supporting him.

I think his admirers need to set their expectations right. He will give you one odd moment of brilliance but to do it six days a week is impossible. But then how should India use him in coming games? It's simple: just erase the finisher tag from his CV and you will still get a Dhoni who is worth his weight in gold. If he wants to retire from the World Cup, just give him a deserving send-off and start working on life after Dhoni. This will be tough but something that Indian cricket and its fans must start thinking about.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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As I sat down to write the preview of India's semi-final game against New Zealand, my mind has rushed back to 2011 World Cup. Eight years ago, we were playing a World Cup semifinal against Pakistan. The venue was Mohali, one of my favourite places to play cricket. I remember the match even vividly. We were staying at Hotel Taj in Chandigarh. My family had driven down from Delhi to watch the game. For the outside world it was a huge game, game of the tournament and as media billed it, a final before the final. But as a team, we were very calm and assured. And I will tell you why.

I have always believed that if you want to win a multi-nation tournament, you must beat Australia. Back in 2011, we had beaten the Aussies in the quarter finals. It was a big deal as the Ricky Ponting-led side was extremely formidable. The semifinals against Pakistan was a relatively easier game for us. I think in 2019, the same logic holds good. India has beaten Australia in the league phase and have their tail up by finishing at the top of the table. India has come riding on a winning streak and it is a no-brainer that they have momentum on their side.

The fact that India was hoping to play England but are ending up playing New Zealand also works in their favour. With due respect to the Kiwis, England are potentially more threatening. So, when you are prepared for a stronger opponent but end up playing slightly weaker team, the confidence automatically goes up. On the other hand, New Zealand would be searching for confidence, coming on the back of three losses and two of those defeats were extremely deflating.

India should go in with more bowling options. I would play Ravinder Jadeja in place of Dinesh Kartik as that gives Virat Kohli more bowling options. Also, the number that Jadeja plays at, his batting style is more suited. I would also recommend to win the toss and bat first although there is rain in the air. In crunch games, it is always better to have one pressure less than one extra. I have always been a big fan of Rohit Sharma. He is a class act, the ease with which he hits big shots is a stuff that dreams are made of. I think the trick with Rohit is not to worry about his Test form and just enjoy what he displays.

It is a big day for this young team. We all knew that India will play the semifinals but the way they have dominated oppositions is extraordinary. Now, a word for all us, the supporters of Indian cricket. Let us be humble in victory and magnanimous in defeat.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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I played only one season of county cricket in 2013 with Essex. It wasn't a great season for me but I learnt a lot of things when I was there. One of them was a misleading belief that the resurgence of English cricket was dependent on players of Asian ancestry. There was a lot of chat about those supple Asian wrists, the spin magic and the unorthodoxy in technique. I was absorbing all of it like a mute spectator but not agreeing with them one bit. Yes, the likes of Monty Panesar, Samit Patel and Ravi Bopara were around the English circuit at that time but to say they will be saviours of their cricket was a bit too much.

Today, they are playing a World Cup final. While they have the likes of Adil Rashid and Moeen Ali in the ranks but they haven't been dependant on them. Their campaign has centred around Joe Root, Ben Stokes, Chris Woakes, Jason Roy and Johny Bairstow. I am not anti any community but I am against the thought which wants you to believe that players from a certain region or race or community are more relevant than others. Merit and only merit should decide who should represent the country rather than any other innocuous basis, least of all ancestry.

England are playing a platinum brand of cricket. They are not holding anything back. It is an absolute fearless approach which has kept them afloat. Even in the reversals they have backed their skills and ability to counter attack. In the semi-finals, England played like Australia did in their prime while Aussies looked a scattered. Normally, it is the other way around. I just hope in the finals against New Zealand, England don't start playing the occasion. It is tough but I have always tried to shut out the hype noise around me in big games.

New Zealand too are hot but am not sure if they are as hot as England. Their bowling with Fergusson, Boult, Henry and Santner is varied. They rely on string of dot balls and chocking the opposition. It will be a battle between English aggression and Kiwi tactics. They need their captain Kane Williamson at the top of his tactics. More than the batsman Williamson I'd say Kiwis need captain Williamson. My heart wants New Zealand but mind says England.

India will be disappointed by the way their campaign has ended. But to call for the heads of the players is being stupid. We don't need to be kneejerk. There is no need to change anything except relook at Dhoni's batting position come the next ODI series. Trust guys like Pant and Pandya, they need mentoring as they are precocious talents. We have lost of lots good hands like Ambati Rayudu due to knee-jerk reactions. Let us not indulge in lounge-room chats over snapping careers of cricketers.